

Fortress Of Giants

by papiliokaze

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Summary: The Batarian Hegemony tries to expand into the Skyllian Verge with the Citadel's consent. The Councils hopes this will bring stability in the large uncharted region. Never would they have guessed that an unknown race waits within the darkness. Very AU. There will be pairings with Liara and Tali! Who gets the Shep and who the OC is not yet decided.

1. Chapter 1

****Disclaimer: ****The Mass Effect series and all its associated products, characters and storyline belong to Bioware. This is a fanfiction with which no profit was made.

****Author's Note:**** This is my second fanfic. Like in my first, any form of review, from hellish flaming to hero worship and everything in between is welcome. The whole thing will be heavily AU with a strong and independent humanity. Most of the story will be from the viewpoint of the council and citadel races. Pairings are undecided. I will try to use as many known characters as possible to preserve the unique atmosphere of Mass Effect.

But most importantly this time round the hyper-cookies will be delivered by kittens with laser-eyes.

****Chapters One: Facing The Unknown****

â€ž... concerning the situation in the Verge..."

Sighing heavily Councillor Tevos leaned back in her luxuriously upholstered chair. She eyed her Salarian counterpart wearily.

"I was not aware there is a situation in the Skyllian Verge that may require our attention at this moment my dear Valern.", said Tevos, asking herself not for the first time how a species so short-lived like the Salarians could speak for so long about, in her opinion,

minor bits of military intelligence.

The Citadel Council held their regular discussion on day to day policy in a grand chamber heavily secured against any form of recording. The computer system used by the councilors in this chamber was completely independent and isolated from the galactic extranet as well as the citadel's own network to make any attempt of hacking futile right at the most basic level. The air was filtered and recycled through a separate system and in the large windows holographic screens to project an image of an empty chamber or one of the councilors working alone to prevent lipreading.

Councilor Sparatus, representing the Turian Hierarchy, spoke in his dual-tone: "I was under the impression our generous concessions towards the Hegemony stabilized the region."

The Salarian councilor Valern sat up straighter. He knew presenting his concerns at the end of a rather long meeting was not the most prudent tactic, but he hoped his colleagues would approve his suggestions simply to get out of the meeting. He would settle for impatient dismissal, if consensus could not be obtained at such an early stage of the intelligence gathering.

"I concur this seemed to be the case when the Batarians first started their expansion in the Skyllian Verge. Their colonization efforts seemed to stop the pirate activity in the region, if only for the fact that was now their own space the pirates would be robbing." Sparatus did not even try to hide a sneer at this rather accurate assumption of his Salarian counterpart. The Batarians had claimed to set out to stop piracy. What they had done was simply stop sending their corsair flottilas and sanctioned pirates into the region. It was a rather clumsy but effective method to establish themselves as the Galaxies new golden boys.

"I can sense a rather large but. Do you suggest our efforts to stop the Verge's descend towards the level of the Terminus Systems were fruitless in the end?", tried Tevos to hurry Valern along. She longed for a large glass of Thessian wine and the arms of one of the Consort's more talented Acolytes.

Slightly miffed at the interruption Valern continued: "We gathered indirect, but nevertheless clear, evidence of strong opposition against the Hegemony during recent months. Batarian production of military vessels is at an all-time high. Recruitment efforts increased significantly. STG-teams intercepted more than one message from the batarian military to the civilian government and back with instructions to prepare their economy for a military budget at least twice the current level."

"This is nothing to concern ourselves with." Sparatus reached for his drink and continued. "It seems natural they would increase their efforts. Seeing they try to stabilise a whole region of the galaxy. One could even go so far and assume they optimistically prepare themselves for a larger role in citadel-space in the near future." Tevos nodded at this while gesturing towards her commando for a refill of her own drink.

"Neither the number of their ships nor their troops increase." said Valern like a master gambler, revealing his winning hand at skyllian five.

"What?!" As always Sparatus masked his confusion with anger. Tevos on the other hand felt herself intrigued despite her former annoyance. She could however not deny herself the pleasure of further annoying the Salarian. " Prey tell what do you mean, my dear Valern."

Valern hardly acknowledged his colleagues reactions and busied himself with handing them several encrypted OSDs.

"As I said before... the Hegemony seems to prepare for larger military efforts. Nothing that could endanger the Council directly or even any of us alone very much, but nonetheless...", he paused to glance at one of the OSDs. "If we define the military capacity of the Batarian Hegemony as 100 % at the start of their expansion in the Verge they should be at least at 128 % considering their recent efforts. And this estimate accounts for the usual loss of personal and material during operations such as this, accidents, regular repairs and scheduled decommissions. They are in fact at 82 %."

"Your conclusion?", asked Tevos now seriously concerned.

"I think they are facing an unknown enemy of, compared to the batarians, considerable power."

Tevos found herself nodding again. "It seems possible. The Skyllian Verge is largely uncharted and the regions beyond are just blank spots on the galactic map."

Sparatus waved a talon dismissively. He highly doubted there was anything there, which could hold a candle against the might of the Hierarchy. "Send a Spectre, if you must."

Grinning at the positive development of the discussion Valern leaned back in his chair. "I have just the man..."

* * *

><p>Jondum Bau sat in Afterlife, Omega's most notorious, but strangely safest nightclub. Well... keeping in mind what Aria T'Loak, resident crime-queen, would do to anyone causing a scene at the club she chose as her palace, it was not that strange. He had no doubt, that Aria knew of his presence the moment he stepped on the station. Which was why his first order of business had been a moderate tribute of credits and information to the Queen of Omega. Large enough to show respect, but humble enough not to catch too much attention. It was not in his interest that Aria would assume he was doing something important or even worse, profitable without her knowledge, consent and participation.<p>

Just like Afterlife's safety seemed strange only at first sight, so was Omega with half a galaxy between the station and the Skyllian Verge only at first sight a foolish place to start the investigation the council had send him on only a standard week ago. But the unofficial capital of the Terminus Systems was not only brimming with Batarians, both of the Hegemony and of pirate syndicates and merc-bands, but also sported a direct connection to the Mass Relay of Shadow Sea well within the Verge. So Omega was ideal. Therefor, just as planned, the presence of his contacts from Khar'shan had gone completely unnoticed.

Jondum walked the short distance from his table to the bar on Afterlife's main floor, where he sat down next to the unassuming Batarian he had identified as one of his agents. The exchange of OSD against credit-chit happened as quick as it happened in silence, before Jondum returned to his table, smiling faintly. All according to plan...

* * *

><p>Aria T'Loak sat in her private suite overlooking her club. Her palace. The center of her empire. She chuckled slightly at her own theatrics.<p>

She would have been angry with Jondum. This Salarian Spectre, who waltzed around her club with impunity. Going all cloak and dagger on her. Well to be fair his efforts had been good. But Aria was better. Centuries better. And she was playing on her very own turf. 'Fucking foolish youngster.', she thought not for the first time this evening. Not bothering to peel her eyes from the delicious ass of the young Asari maiden gyrating her hips in front of her, Aria addressed Moklan, who was stoically guarding the entrance to her suite:

"Moklan! Go and cripple Bau's ship."

She did not really care what piece of information the Salarian had obtained. She knew it was of little consequence to her at the moment, but the fact that he tried the whole thing directly under her nose all but screamed for a little slap on the wrist.

"And hack his bank account while you're at it!"

...or maybe two slaps.

* * *

><p>Tela Vasir stepped out of the shower just as her terminal signaled an incoming transmission. Rolling her eyes at the timing, she quickly threw on a light robe and answered the call. The worried face of her fellow Spectre Jondum Bau appeared on the glowing holo-screen.<p>

"Jondi! Your timing sucks more than every whore on Omega. What do you want?"

"Tela. Need favor. Council business. Confidential. Will redirect payment with bonus from my own sources of course."

"Go on..."

"Require you to travel to Skyllian Verge immediately. Will send you coordinates. Batarian started some kind of secret war against unknown enemy. Obtained most likely date and place for next Batarian offensive. Needs to be observed."

"What? Why me? You do know where I am? I'm from Tuchanka on route to the Citadel. I will need three to four relay jumps just to get to the Verge! Do your investigations yourself."

"Impossible. Ship crippled. Minor squabble with Aria need time to smooth things over. Alternative transport not possible either. You will need your long-range stealth fighter to observe Batarians without detection. No such vessel on Omega. You are only one with required skill and equipment."

"Double your pay from the council plus a complete retrofitting with state of the art weaponry for both my fighter and the corvette and you got a deal."

Jondum sighed. He knew Tela as a greedy cloaca and was prepared to pay even more. He was bound to fulfill his mission. Even if this meant to get someone else to do it.

"Very well Tela. Will buy you diner as well. But leave now. Please inform me of progress."

"Will do Jondi", chirped Tela immensely pleased with herself. "See ya..."

* * *

><p>Little over a week later Tela sat in her Asari made fighter in some uncharted system deep within the Skyllian Verge. With her emission sink active she was impossible to detect and had followed the sizable Batarian fleet for two days now. What the damn four-eyes wanted with three dreadnoughts, ten heavy cruisers, five light cruisers and twelve frigates so deep within a region of the galaxy that housed no civilization to speak of was beyond her. It was common knowledge in citadel-space, that the Verge was nearly devoid of intelligent life.<p>

"So why are these idiots wasting resources parading a heavy fleet around like a pet warren?", she murmured just as the two heavy cruisers, which formed the vanguard of the Batarian fleet exploded in a sudden flash of blue-black light. Before her eyes eight sleek black ships appeared seemingly out of nowhere. Judging from their size it seemed to be cruisers. They were angular and strangely alien in design. Massive and stubborn yet deadly graceful their sight send chills down Tela's spine.

Five of the ships moved lazily forward, almost taunting the Batarians, who were frantic to get the fleet in battle formation. The remaining cruiser opened fire. The thirteen blue lines produced by the Hegemony's newest mass accelerator canons streaked towards the unknown enemy, concentrating on a single vessel. To Tela's shock the alien ship was absolutely unscathed. Just as she tried to fathom the immense power necessary to produce kinetic barriers with this might it was the aliens turn to fire.

At both sides of each alien vessel slowly appeared a streak of glowing red light. Had Tela's blood not been blue like all Asari. She had likened the red planes of light to a gruesome smear of blood.

The five ships, which had moved towards the Batarians, emitted a massive golden-red beam which cut into the dreadnoughts seemingly ignoring the barriers. While the supposedly mighty ships exploded taking several of the frigates with them the remaining three unknown ships fired dozens of small missiles at their enemy. Each Batarian

that was hit with more than three of these missiles was either heavily damaged or outright destroyed.

After the battle Tela glanced at the ships chronometer. The whole slaughter had not even lasted two standard hours. It truly was no battle but a slaughter. Never in her life was she more thankful for the stealth feature of her fighter.

She cursed herself. The battle had been so captivating and sudden, that she had no vid-footage. She hastily wrote a quick report for the council. She would have to report back with a more detailed description of the events, but this would have to suffice for the moment.

She was finished as she looked again at her instruments. They were gone! All but one of the alien ships had vanished. How could this have happened? The remaining vessel turned towards her fighter. No. They could not possibly detect her. Panic started to rise as a small alarm announced an incoming transmission.

Send by: UNKNOWN

Source: WITHIN SYSTEM

Language: UNKNOWN

The alien had made contact. No. No . No. No. Impossible. She opened the message with trembling fingers. It was a short text written in a language neither she nor her VI could decipher yet seemed eerily familiar.

The Alien Ship opened fire. One of the missiles which only minutes before had obliterated so many vessels shot towards her. With a speed only possible in her state of utter terror Tela Varis, Asari commando and Council Spectre for more than two centuries wrote a few lines, attached the alien message, send both her dying words and her reports to the council and...

simply perished.

* * *

><p>Once again Councilor Tevos sat in her luxuriously upholstered chair within the secure confines of the chamber. One of her commandos entered and wordlessly handed her an OSD. She quickly read the contents and turned toward her waiting colleagues.<p>

"We have a report from Spectre Vasir regarding the situation in the Skyllian Verge. Her report states, eight ships, possibly cruisers, of unknown make and origin destroyed a large Batarian Fleet in under two hours." She looked gravely at both the Salarian and the Turian. "The alien ships suffered no losses."

"Preposterous! Utterly ridiculous!", screamed Sparatus. Tevos only raised a hand.

"There is a second message. It reads: 'Alien vessel made contact. Attaching message. Am under fire. May the goddess guide my soul to the oceans.' Let me open the attachment..."

Valern and Sparatus observed as the Matriarch read the message from these supposed aliens. With every line she grew paler. After she was finished she wordlessly handed them the text. Neither understood the strange language.

Valern was first to voice his confusion, while Sparatus once again resorted to silent anger. "What is this? I have never seen this language."

"It is a very ancient Asari dialect. It translates to:"

"Blood and destruction shall be so in use
>And dreadful objects so familiar
That mothers shall but smile
when they behold
>Their infants quarter'd with the hands of war;
All pity choked
with custom of fell deeds:
>And our warrior's spirit, ranging for revenge,
With Athame by her
side come hot from hell,
>Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry 'Havoc,' and
let slip the beasts of war."

* * *

><p>On board the black ship that had remained in the system as Tela had written her quick report a human gazed grimly upon the battlefield. He turned towards a heavy door at the back of the CIC and thought:<p>

"Now let us see if the council can handle the waking of the sleeping giants."

AN: The lines of the contact message are from William Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. I adapted it slightly so it can be understood by an Asari. The significance of this will be revealed later. I hope you enjoyed the chapter.

The Batarian Hegemony tries to expand into the Skyllian Verge with the Citadel's consent. The Councils hopes this will bring stability in the large uncharted region. Never would they have guessed that an unknown race waits within the darkness. It is time humanity emerges from the shadows. It is time for System Alliance to cry havoc upon the galaxy. Very AU. Strong independent Humanity. There will be pairings with Liara and Tali! Who gets the Shep and who the OC is not yet decided.

2. Chapter 2

****Disclaimer:** **The Mass Effect series and all its associated products, characters and storyline belong to Bioware. This is a fanfiction with which no profit was made.

****Author's Note:**** Thank you very much for the reviews and the alerts! They were a perfect mix of constructive critique and encouragement. First of all I'd like to apologize for the typos and grammatical errors. Yes, English is not my first language and yes I have no Beta, but I really hate stories where you stumble over an error every few words. It can really corrupt the flow of any story and I will try to do better.

More than one of you wrote, that the story seemed rushed. I tried to create an atmosphere in which the events run away with the council and before they know it they are in it up to their eyeballs. But I agree there would have been space for a slower development or more details. So I will try to slow the whole thing down without losing the drive of the story. To be honest I just wanted to get started...

EternalSoldier: Good idea. Bau is alive and still stranded on Omega :) so there will be some more development there.

I will reveal the origin of humanities power and technology in time but that will take a while. But let me assure you there will be neither a god-like System Alliance nor a completely stupid council. For everything else I beg your patience. I hope you will enjoy the new chapter.

And since I got such nice reviews I will update the hyper-cookies to gargantuan pies. And the kittens will be twelve stories high!

****Chapters Two: Chasing Rumours And Phantoms****

Kenn'Tokren nar Chatal was not a happy Quarrian. He had arrived on Omega only a week ago and already his credits got stolen, he had come close to two suit breaches and to top it all up his recent batch of sanitized dextro-based nutrient paste was just compromised and he had to repeat the whole laborious filtering process. While carefully inserting another tube of the greyish, tasteless paste into his portable disinfectant he contemplated his options. He could always try to sell salvaged parts. But seeing the ruthless competition everywhere on the station, even in trading outdated technology, that was possibly not the most prudent idea. Just as trying to get clean food prepared in a dirty alleyway a few blocks from the docks was probably not the best choice. But with no money there were not much you could do regarding living arrangements. His concerned seemed confirmed when a sharp howl of pain echoed from the next alley.

"Told you to hand over information. Not wise angering Spectre. Patience tends to run out. Will shoot you if no cooperation is given."

The voice had come from around the corner. Unmistakeably the hasty staccato of Salarian speech patterns. Kenn had learned that much during his training for the pilgrimage, the Quarrian rite of passage.

'_A Spectre? Keelah_', thought Kenn. '_Now I'm in it up to my respirator. Hide. Hide. Gotta hide._' The young Quarrian dove behind a derelict cooling system not ten steps from the entrance to the alley. A few minutes later a single gunshot rang through the backstreet. Boot steps approached.

* * *

><p>Jondum Bau inspected his ship's engines for the third time while he contemplated his next move. The continuation of the mission was ensured. The quick call he had made to Tela an hour ago had taken care of that for now. He did not like Agent Vasir any better than his

other fellow Spectres, but considering the circumstances she was the best choice.<p>

'_Damn that Aria_', he thought. One of her thugs had made a fine mess of the ships systems. Hes was not bad with repairs, but this was beyond him. Booking a passage back to citadel-space to get a new ship was a possibility, but a time consuming one. He could confiscate one, but then he would either get a shitty ship or get a shitty ship after killing lots and lots of angry mercs, pirates or smugglers. Or smuggling pirate-mercs. Bloody scum that they are it would stir up a lot of noise. And this would rub Aria seriously the wrong way. So he would have to stay on the station for now. He also was sure there was still some information gathering possible. His contact had helpfully pointed out several Batarians from the Hegemony fleet on shore-leave around Afterlife. Surely with some gentle prodding some additional intel was his for the taking.

But before Jondum started any new endeavour he would have to appease Aria. He knew this whole business was little more than a slap on the wrist. It had even amused him, that her thug had tried to get to his accounts. He had only found the fake ones Jondum had set up for just an occasion like this anyway. And just like the whole thing was minor but necessary in Aria's eyes, the amends he will have to make will be minor but necessary. He held not great fear or even respect for the pirate-queen, but he had to admit. Things went a lot smoother, if you had her, if not on your side, than at the very least graciously ignoring your proceedings.

He put his ship one lock-down and made a beeline from the docks the the entrance of Afterlife. For the second time in so many days.

"With constrained anger: Hey Salarian! You have to get in line."

The Elcor bouncer really started to annoy Jondum. He had spoken to exactly the same thing yesterday. So what better way to react than how he had done yesterday. He unclipped the Spectre-grade heavy pistol from the magnetic holster on his belt and hold it up for the giant quadruped to see. The Elcor's prominent olfactory sensor-flaps quivered in an attempt to get more of Jondum pheromones to better asses his mood. Sadly this worked only with other Elcor.

"Aria is waiting for me. Better not waste time."

"Nervously: Go through then. It will not be necessary to cause a disturbance. Hastily: Move along"

Jondum quickly negotiated his way through the dancing crowd towards a heavily armed Turian, who stood near the main bar. His hard-suit had been expertly painted with Aria's colours the red and black flames of Afterlife. A queen of hell indeed. "Aria?" More did he not need to ask. He was quickly ushered through a discreet door at the back of the club next to the stairs to Aria's suite. The inside was empty beside an elegantly curved couch and a small table. He sat down and waited.

And waited.

And waited

After that he waited some more.

After that he sharpened the knife in his boot, checked the seals of his suit and made a quick inventory of his medi-gel supply.

Then... he waited.

He had heard the DJ outside in the club change three times before a stocky Batarian entered the room carrying a tray with low bowl and a small bottle. The waiter set the beverage wordlessly on the table and exited the room rather quick. Jondum grabbed the bottle, lifted the cap and gingerly took a smell.

"Aegohr-liqueur?" He was genuinely surprised. The drink from the capital city of the old Salarian colony world Nasurn was not really hard to come by, since the production rate on the planet was quite high. It was just that booze distilled from the fermented pituitary gland of a segmented worm tended to be less popular outside Salarian space. What really surprised him was not the rarity of the drink on Omega, since the club advertised the fact it had a sample of every drink in the galaxy. It was the fact that Aria had just served him his favourite drink. A drink he did not even have when he was on the citadel.

When Aria finally stalked through the door her eyes fell upon the Spectre while he carefully scanned the drink with his omnitool. "It is not poisoned, you know...", she commented in dry amusement.

"Did not want to cause offence. Force of habit. Am usually involved in...", he sniffed. "...dangerous business."

Aria sat down on the couch, gracefully crossed her legs and leaned back in the soft upholstery. Her gaze lingered on Jundom. "Soooo... What can a humble merchant-venturer such as myself do for the almighty Special Tactics and Reconnaissance?"

"Not what _you_ can do for me. What _I_ can do for you."

" 'That so?" A cruel little smile graced the Matriarch's exquisitely sculptured features. "And why would that be the case?"

"Made error. Am free to admit that. Can see how my investigations outside your supervision may have caused offence. But council missions are of great importance. A Spectre will not be stopped. But a Spectre can see the wisdom of proper timing. This is the time to offer you a deal."

Aria did not cock an eyebrow. She was not surprised Jondum had cut to the chase. It was a Salarian thing. This made the hours she had kept him waiting more annoying for him and more sweet for her. She waved a hand lazily for him to continue.

"Situation in the Hegemony is of interest for the council. Will not go into details, Sure you understand. Or know them anyway." He allowed himself a slight smirk, which Aria returned confidently. In truth she had no idea what he was talking about, but she was far too long in the game to reveal any lack of information. She had honed the art of projecting a field power and omniscience to perfection over the last centuries.

"Your... interest in my investigation could complicate mission. Hate complications. Sure you can emphasize. So will offer you this for degree of... leeway for the next few days." The Spectre handed Aria an OSD and continued. "Can assure you, will be finished soon. Leave after ship is restored. Compliments to your employees. Did thorough job."

She levelled him with a long cold stare and glanced quickly through the contents of the OSD. The in one swift move she stood.

"We have an agreement. Spectre." and with that the queen of Omega left the room.

* * *

><p>"Moklan! Get your four-eyed ass in here!"<p>

Aria's Batarian right hand man scrambled to his feet and hurried to his mistress. That did not sound very good and he tried desperately to compose a list of people he could blame for whatever had crawled up the Asari's ass this time.

"Ma'am?"

"Don't 'Ma'am' me you snot-nosed sack of varren-shit! Those foul bastards your people call a government on Khar'shan are up to something. I want details. Yesterday!"

"On it." Moklan snapped off a salute and got the hell out. Once out of the suite and back in the club a sat near the bar and sighed. '_Time to call the home world I guess..._'

* * *

><p>Finding Batarian with strong ties the military or even in the military themselves had not been a problem for Jondum. Hacking their omnitools for hints on usable intel had not been hard either. But seeing that Omega was abundant with Batarians of any kind even more than usual made the whole thing a bit taxing for the Salarian's nerves. He had just gained a few days or relative freedom from Aria and had to make use of his limited time. So he sat in dirty little tavern near the slums not half an hour after he had left Afterlife and hacked 'tools by the minute.<p>

'_52... no intel. 53... no intel. 54... no intel. Lots of porn though. Well what can you do without a sex-drive. 55... no intel. 56... no intel. Interesting security mod though. Had me occupied for nearly 30 seconds. Good, Good. 57... no intel. 58... no int... Wait. What? '_

Although he had hoped to find exactly that kind of file, Jondum had never thought to find it that quickly. He had asked Aria for a few days with a reason. The Omnitool on which he had found the file in question belonged to a liaison officer for naval intelligence, who was stationed with a battalion of shock troopers on one the their newer dreadnoughts. Why he had not destroyed the copy on his 'tool was beyond Jondum. It was basic security procedure. Well the Batarian's stupidity was the Spectre's gain. After a just a glance through the intelligence report he had obtained he knew the investigation was not yet over. The data was good and astonishingly

complete, but it would need to be set into context. So when the Batarian officer staggered out of the bar a few hours later he had a Spectre on his tail.

The alley, like more or less any alley on Omega was in equal parts dark, dirty and filled with indescribable odours. Not a comfortable place to do business, but at least a discreet one. Creeping up on the officer Jondum and slapped a small circular device on his belt. Immediately the Batarian's pistol and shotgun flew from his hip as if they had been launched from a sling-shot.

"What theâ€¦", before he could finish the sentence, the Spectre had already slammed him against a nearby dumpster, on hands gripping his neck, the other twisting his arm.

"Hit you with polarity inverter. Your magnetic belt-clips pushed your weaponry away since it now was charged with wrong polarity. Basic physics. Should have known. Am disappointed in level of education."

"What do you want, lizard."

"Rude. Salarian not lizards. Different taxonomic rank to be precise. I want details and context. What have you encountered in the Verge?"

"Fuck you!" Jondum gave the Batarian's arm a sharp twist to which he gave a pained whimper.

"Advise you to hand over information. Going against me will cause you pain."

"I said fuâ€¦" Jondum jerked the arm he held with a sudden upwards movement and the limb popped out of his socket. Then he took the wrist turned it slightly and pushed. At once a nerve-cluster was trapped between the misaligned parts of the shoulder joint. This time the Batarian howled loudly from the pain.

"Told you to hand over information. Not wise angering Spectre. Patience tends to run out. Will shoot you if no cooperation is given."

Between gritted teeth Jondum's captive answered: "All right. All right. Put me down I'll talk."

The Spectre complied and lowered the Batarian to the floor. But not without pointing his pistol to his head. He activated his omni-tool's recording system.

"Start talking." And he did. After he was finished Jondum sighed.

"Thank you for cooperation. Sadly hegemony can not know of our involvement or level of information. This means goodbye."

With this the Salarian Spectre shot the Batarian officer neatly in the head, stripped him of his credits and weapons and walked away.

Kenn'Tokren closed his eyes as the boot steps stopped near his hiding

place. He had not heard anything important. He knew that the Spectre knew that. But he was a Quarrian. His people were not held in high regard in the '_galactic_ _community_'. He scoffed mentally at the thought. Not much community in this galaxyâ€¦

"Better come out. Registered heat signature. Try not to be stupid."

Slowly, his hands raised above his head, Kenn complied with the order. The Spectre was indeed a Salarian, clad in black and white armour. He held his pistol casually at his side, but the young Quarrian knew this made no difference to pointing it straight to his head. If the Spectre wanted him dead, he would not survive.

"A Quarrian? Unusual on Omega. Why are you here?"

"Pilgrimage..."

"Yes. Logical. Should have known. Tell me boy, you good with engines?"

Despite his growing fear Kenn straightened up. "Of course! I'm a Quarrian!"

"Very well. Should shoot you. But doubt you have heard anything. Will check your 'tool later regardless. Come with me. I'm in need of your services. Standard council engineers pay, dextro food your own responsibility. Follow me."

And without a backward glance to see if he was obeyed the Spectre strode towards the docks.

"Hey what's your name?" asked Kenn as he jogged behind the Salarian

"Jondum Bau, Council Special Tactics and Reconnaissance."

* * *

><p>"Balut. Take your squad and check out the cyanobacteria depot. The have not been in contact for the last four hours."<p>

Sergeant Toklan Balut, squad leader in the Aratoht Local Defence Legion saluted the Lieutenant, who had given him the order and sent word to his subordinates to meet him at the shuttle depot, while he checked his equipment. Since the discovery of the Viper Nebula, the Bahak System had been the focus of Batarian colonization. Aratoht with its rich lodes of ferrous and heavy metals was especially attractive. Even the very low air pressure and oxygen content of the atmosphere did nothing to prevent settling. To combat these shortcomings large quantities of cyanobacteria were dumped every day to enrich the air. Toklan knew all this and so he also knew that a disturbance in the depot could be critical and even worse... expensive.

His five-men squad had already boarded the shuttle when Toklan arrived. Their quarters were closer to the noise of the flight depot than his. Such were the small perks of an NCO. He acknowledged his soldiers with a nod and boarded as well. The shuttle was an old model

with minimal air conditioning so they all felt the heat of the planet as they left the hangar with course towards the depot. Most facilities on Aratoth were near the pole regions, where the heat was at least bearable. Sadly the depot was more than a few clicks south and so they could feel the temperature rise steadily. Toklan cursed under his breath. It was just his luck that he always got assigned one of those shuttles, which were not equipped for leaving the atmosphere. Those had at least proper isolation and air-recycling systems.

With the old slammer it had taken the squad over two hours to get to the depot. Upon arrival they saw a large, flat complex of buildings with the three closed basins for the bacteria, each nearly 150 metres in diameter. The pilot sat the craft down at the port on the far side of the complex.

"Shouldn't there be someone here to greet us?"

Toklan tilted his head to the right at this stupid remark of the private. "Since they gave no response to any form of radio contact for over six hours I would be pretty pissed, if they just showed up here like there was nothing wrong, you ignorant vorcha-brain. Now move out! I want the facility swept without a fuss or any bitching. Check for any damages and locate these technicians."

The soldiers hastily tilted their heads to the left, as a show of respect and entered the depot via the large gate on the far side of the landing-patch.

Even after the six Batarians split up into three teams of two it took them a long time to search the whole complex. The status-updates Toklan received every 15 minutes were the same ever time.

"Nothin' to report sarge..."

Well into the third hour of constant searching Toklan's radio crackled into life.

"Fuck sarge! Get to the control room. We found the technicians!"

"So? What's their status?"

"Just get here Toklan... This is bad."

Although the sergeant took the distance from his location to the control room nearly all at a dead run he still needed ten minutes to get there. By the time he arrived the rest of the squad had already assembled. They seemed to be staring at something inside the room. One private noisily threw in a corner.

"Okay! What are you lot standing around for? You have a fuckin' job to..."

Toklan stopped abruptly stopped as he entered the room and saw the scene inside.

"Fuck! Who would do something like this?", he asked quietly.

The private who had just emptied his bowels whispered: "The Phantoms

of the Verge..."

"Don't be fucking stupid. They are just some weak aliens. This is not some little border world! This is a fucking fortress planet. So shut up with your fairy tails! My bet is on rouge mercs." Although his voice did not betray it, Toklan very much doubted his own words. Attacking this facility held no prospect of monetary gain of any kind. And what else would mercs want?

"Mercs? With all do respect sarge, this is varren-shit! How could mercs do something like this? How would anyone outside the Hegemony would even know what this means? And no Batarian would do this!"

On the other side of the room the private who had been in Toklan's two-men-team had just checked the controls for the three basins. "Sarge. The cyanobacteria... the whole population is dead. All three basins have been flooded with some kind of acidic agent."

So the facility was crippled. Still not quite believing what he could see he once again scanned the room. As if hoping if he checked the scene often enough it would vanish.

All eleven technicians hung from the ceiling. Four gaping holes in each head. Their eyes had been gauged out.

Their souls would be forever trapped inside their rotting corpses.

* * *

><p>It had been little over a week since Jondum had departed from Omega towards the Citadel. He was very annoyed he could not get in touch with the council. Or at least Tela. Sadly the Quarian he had acquired as an engineer had given him limited options regarding the ship's engines. Fast, cheap or good. Kenn had said, he could do two out of three and even that would be stretching the possibilities he had been presented with. Sadly those two options had been neither fast and cheap nor fast and good or even cheap and good. So Jondum had settled for fast and cheap. So Kenn had dismantled a few things tinkered for about half a day and they had been ready to go.<p>

Among the drawbacks of his liberal re-purposing of parts from 'minor' system was an increase of the air temperature by five degrees, flickering lights in Jondum's private cabin, the loss of his armour's shield-generator and most irritatingly... the complete loss of all FTL-communication.

Therefore, the first thing the Spectre did, as they approached the Citadel, was sending his full report to the council and then requested docking permission.

After they had docked, Jondum watched Kenn expertly re-integrating the shield-generator into his hard-suite, as a message arrived. The Salarian glanced through its contents and said: "Hurry up. Have council business. You may board the citadel. Do not cause trouble. Will send you message if your service is required further."

Ten minutes later Kenn'Tokren nar Chatal parted ways with the Spectre at an elevator to the wards thinking: '_Keelah... I hope this place is better than Omega!_'

* * *

><p>While Kenn started his hopeful exploration of the wonders of the galactic capital, Jondum reached the secure conference room of the esteemed citadel-council. The guard ushered him promptly in. The councilors turned towards him and he snapped to attention.<p>

"At ease Spectre Bau.", said councillor Tevos. "Yesterday we received a report of Spectre Vasir. We hope you can shed some light on her untimely death."

Jondum just gaped.

* * *

><p>Several hundred kilometres north of the depot Toklan and his squad were investigating crouched a woman in greyish armour with a single, blood-red stripe down the left side of her chest. Directly over her heart.<p>

"Gunny?"

"Commander?"

"Sitrep."

The man who had just arrived at the woman's position checked the readings, displayed on the visor of his helmet. He wore the same armour as the commander bar the red stripe.

"The second team is well away. Charges are set. Everything five-by."

"Very well. Both teams head towards the extraction point. Blow the charges."

"Aye-Aye, ma'am." and with that a dull thud could be heard among the large military compound both men had been observing from their vantage point on the hill. Just a few milliseconds after the initial thud, barely distinguishable for the ear, the ammunition-depot burst into a gigantic ball of flame on depris, catapulted at terminal velocity. Sirens went off, but were quickly silenced as the generator, which should have provided them with energy erupted in secondary explosions. Under thirty seconds after the first charge had been triggered the entirety of Aratoht Local Defence Legion's base was awash with flames.

On the hill the commander looked grimly upon the hell she unleashed. Quietly, barely above a whisper she said: "Move out."

**Update: **I changed a tiny detail so the story works better later on.

Author's Note: I wanted to add some thoughts on galactic settlement and the formation of territory. My understanding of the colonisation method of the citadel races is as follows:

You find a dormant relay.

You find out where the relay leads to.

You go there via FTL to find out if some kind of Rachni 2.0 lurk on the other side.

If the connected system is save you open the relay and claim the relay system and most likely the systems around it.

Colonisation and further exploration starts.

This means, there can be no closed spaces, that belong to a certain country like we are used to in good, old reality. The domains of the different races will be scattered with holes in them, maybe even overlap or intertwine with others.

I found it therefore very hard to locate the Skyllian Verge to begin with or establish a distinct zone of interest for the Batarians or humanity. And since I only know of the Armstrong, Viper and Petra Nebula as clusters within the Verge I'm a bit miffed they are not neatly next to each other. So I will have to take some liberties with the location of certain systems or clusters. So don't skin me please if you find a map on which the what's-his-name-cluster is not where I said it is or if it takes three and not five relay jumps to get from there to the I-don't-give-a-shit-system.

Other than that a quick glance in the next chapter. We will accompany Jondi, meet some more Quarrians (maybe even our favourite), catch a new glimpse on humanity and maybe someone will "...demand action!" I hope you enjoyed the chapter. It is a pleasure writing for you. Stay tuned.

End
file.